



## The influence of social media in creating expectations. An empirical study for a tourist destination



Yeamduan Narangajavana\*, Luis José Callarisa Fiol, Miguel Ángel Moliner Tena, Rosa María Rodríguez Artola, Javier Sánchez García

*Departamento de Administración de Empresas y Marketing, Universitat Jaume I, Castellón de la Plana 12071, Spain*

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### ABSTRACT

Social media are transforming the tourism industry from its traditional pattern into an intense informational pattern. Our study aims to investigate the causes underlying the use of user-generated contents (UGC) to receive tourist information and its effect on tourists' expectations. Our empirical work was analysed by means of a multiple indicators multiple causes model (MIMIC) and a structural equation model (SEM). The main finding showed that when users receive UGC related to tourist destinations, they will create expectations about the destination by placing their trust in the contents received. It is recommended that tourism organizations should maintain the quality level in order to allow more UGC, and then further trust in the contents of social media and expectations will occur.

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### Introduction

Social media have an impact on tourism, especially in the way the way travellers access and use tourism information (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). These media have affected the tourism environment by changing the behaviour of both tourists and business sectors (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). While social media and the Internet was becoming popular among tourists (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), the tourism industry turned into an information-intense industry, since the social media allow tourists to challenge and collaborate in producing, consuming and distributing travel information through the Internet (Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). In addition, Xiang et al. (2015) added that the arrival of online and cloud access through mobile devices can create new sources of information to be searched, which later tend to become progressively more prominent in guiding travel decisions.

Due to the fact that the social media have various utilities, they have gained a substantial amount of popularity in travellers' use of the Internet (Nezakati et al., 2015; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The reasons for this popularity are that social media allow large numbers of people to express opinions, feeling, experiences, etc. in an innovative way (Luo & Zhong, 2015). Similarly, in our case, these people are tourists who can search for, read and receive information regarding tourist suppliers and tourist destinations through the reviews that were posted by other tourists via social media (Chung & Koo, 2015; Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012). Hence, the reviews posted on social media, which recent literature has named user-generated

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [ynaranga@uji.es](mailto:ynaranga@uji.es) (Y. Narangajavana), [callarisa@uji.es](mailto:callarisa@uji.es) (L.J. Callarisa Fiol), [amoliner@uji.es](mailto:amoliner@uji.es) (M.Ángel Moliner Tena), [artola@uji.es](mailto:artola@uji.es) (R.M. Rodríguez Artola), [jsanchez@uji.es](mailto:jsanchez@uji.es) (J. Sánchez García).

content (UGC) or consumer-generated media (CGM), are important for both generating and acquiring information related to travel.

The study of UGC related to tourism on social media is still in an early stage (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), although we can separate it into two phases. The first includes most of the literature concentrated on general information and how it affects the tourism industry. It was found that earlier research works, such as that of Conrady (2007), in their respective studies, analysed the influence of the new technologies on tourism. Further, other researchers, such as Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, and Buultjens (2009), Gretzel and Yoo (2008) analysed the impact of the UGC on travel planning decisions, especially those concerning accommodation. The second refers to the literature that attempts to link UGC on social media to other aspects such as tourists' behaviour (Gretzel, Lee, Tussyadiah, & Fesenmaier, 2009), intention to buy/use (Cox et al., 2009), attitudinal factors and their influence on the use and creation of UGC (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008), trust in and the creditability of the websites on which the UGC is posted and their impact on trip planning (Yoo, Lee, & Gretzel, 2007; Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009), and loyalty and the effect of electronic work-of-mouth (eWOM) on the final destination choices (Luo & Zhong, 2015).

Authors such as Lim, Chung, and Weaver (2012) or more recently Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) express their interest in discovering how UGC on social media inform the different players in the tourism industry, so as to enrich tourist experiences and to promote tourist services and destinations. Nevertheless, the research on UGC in the tourism sector still needs to expand and fill the research gap in several different areas. For example, various studies focus on the motive for creating such contents (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Daugherty et al., 2008) or the motivations for visiting a destination (Llodrá-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015), but none of them concentrate on the motivations for receiving the contents and how this can encourage tourists to visit the destination. Moreover, to date there are no studies dealing with the relationships between UGC in social media and tourists' expectations.

In order to further the knowledge of UGC related to the tourism industry and to close the gap, our study aims to analyse the impact of received UGC on tourists' expectations, and, more particularly, to determine how their expectations about a tourist destination are generated via the use of social media. Specifically, it will examine how the intensity of social media usage can influence the motivations for receiving UGC and how it can persuade tourists to visit the destination, with special attention given to the effect on tourists' expectations. Thus, we have designed a research study concentrated on a specific tourist destination: Valencia, Spain. This research has two different parts. First, we focused on tourists to see how and why the tourists use UGC. Second, from the first part, we discover how UGC influences tourists' behaviour, particularly their expectations and trust. Finally, we discuss the contributions made by the study, recommendations, and future research for the academic field of tourism.

### Conceptual framework and theoretical model

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm was applied for the evaluation of satisfaction on product performance (Oliver, 1977). Later, in the 1980s, more researchers expanded it to include knowledge about service satisfaction. The problematic issues started when Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry presented a SERVQUAL in 1988 to measure perception on service quality. It was criticized and became one of the most prolific debates in the 1990s. For example, Cronin and Taylor (1992) compared SERVQUAL with SERVPERF, a tool which is based only on the measurement of perception. However, the issue still needed to be studied further in order to gain an understanding and measure of customer satisfaction with expectations and service quality.

The process of tourist satisfaction formation is typically explained by the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980). The expectation-disconfirmation model says that tourists develop expectations about a product or service before purchasing it. Subsequently, they compare actual performance with those expectations. Tourists usually have initial expectations regarding the type and quality of services to be offered at a particular destination (Lorenzo, Avilés, & Centeno, 2010). The extent to which tourist expectations are met will eventually determine the level of tourist satisfaction. If the overall performance, while or after visiting a destination, exceeds or meets the initial expectations, then the tourist is considered satisfied. Otherwise, the tourist may be dissatisfied.

Expectations are regarded as standards against which tourists assess a provider's performance (Meirovich & Little, 2013). Researchers acknowledge the existence of various classes of expectations, among which growing interest is focused on two particular types: normative and predictive expectations. The notion of normative (should) expectations was developed in the service quality literature as an element of the SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). These expectations constitute customers' beliefs about what a service provider should offer and represent standards against which customers compare their perceptions of product or service quality. On the other hand, the concept of predictive (will) expectations emerged in customer satisfaction literature as a component of the expectation-disconfirmation model (Oliver, 1980). Within the framework of the expectation-disconfirmation model, predictive expectation is an experience-based prediction or anticipation of what is likely to happen in the future.

The formation of tourists' expectations is important not only because it influences satisfaction, but also because it is a first element of the purchasing decision. The appearance of Internet, and especially the social media, in the tourism business has changed the rules. Nowadays, tourists' expectations do not depend on only traditional word of mouth from relatives and acquaintances or on the communication that is made by travel agencies or tourist destination. Social media and UGC allow

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